

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9691

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AMEMBASSY MADRID

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 10502

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: FR PINT PGOF

SUBJECT: THE CENTER AND CHIRAC

REF: PARIS 6815

SUMMARY: TWO WEEKS AFTER THE FACT, FRENCH CENTRIST FORMATIONS REMAIN DEEPLY CONCERNED OVER THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING'S DECISION TO DESIGNATE PRIME MINISTER CHIRAC AS "COORDINATOR AND ANIMATOR" OF MAJORITY POLITICAL PARTIES. CHIRAC'S OWN APPEARANCE BEFORE CENTRIST PARLIAMENTARIANS ON APRIL 5 WAS ONLY marginally SUCCESSFUL IN LAYING TO REST FEARS THAT HIS APPOINTMENT SIGNALLED A WEAKENED GOV DETERMINATION TO PURSUE REFORM. ANNOUNCEMENT APR8L 8 THAT GOVERNMENT WILL IGNORE CENTRIST (AND LEFT) CALLS FOR GENERAL POLITICAL DEBATE AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SEEMS CERTAIN TO EVOKE NEW CRIES OF ANGUISH. CENTER AS WELL AS REST OF MAJORITY IS ANTICIPATING THAT PRESIDENT WILL ATTEMPT TO CLARIFY HIS ATTITUDE ON REFORM DURING PRESS CONFERENCE SCHEDULED FOR APRIL 22. END SUMMARY.

1. AS PART OF HIS RECENTLY ACQUIRED DUTIES AS PRESI-

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DENTIAL MAJORITY "COORDINATOR," PRIME MINISTER JACQUES

CHIRAC MET WITH CENTRIST PARLIAMENTARIANS APRIL 5. THE MEETING CAPPED A SERIES OF APPEARANCES BEFORE MAJORITY FORMATIONS DURING RECENT DAYS WHICH HAVE TAKEN THE PRIME MINISTER TO NICE FOR A MEETING WITH THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLICANS AND TO SAINT JEAN DE LUZ FOR A GAULLIST GATHERING (PARIS 9843). CHIRAC'S MESSAGE TO THE CENTRISTS WAS NEARLY IDENTICAL TO WHAT THE IR AND UDR HAD HEARD: ORGANIZATION AND HARD WORK ARE THE KEYS TO A MAJORITY VICTORY IN THE 1978 LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. CHIRAC ALSO ASSURED HIS CENTRIST LISTENERS THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD CONTINUE TO BACK "NECESSARY REFORMS" AND USED THE OCCASION TO ANNOUNCE THAT FOR THE DURATION OF HIS SERVICES AS COORDINATOR HE WOULD ABSTAIN FROM UDR LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES.

2. BUT WHERE CHIRAC THE "COORDINATOR" WAS GREETED WITH ENTHUSIASM BY THE UDR AND AT LEAST RESIGNATION BY THE IR, HIS RECEPTION BY THE CENTRISTS WAS DECIDEDLY COOL. THE OVERALL IMPRESSION WAS THAT IT WAS GOING TO TAKE MORE THAN ONE MEETING TO CALM CENTRIST FEARS OF GAULLIST DOMINATION. AS ONE CENTRIST DEPUTY REMARKED TO AN EMBASSY OFFICER, "CHIRAC'S WITHDRAWAL FROM THE UDR WOULD HAVE BEEN FAR MORE CONVINCING TO CENTRISTS HAD IT COME BEFORE THE GAULLISTS AT SAINT JEAN DE LUZ." IT ALSO APPEARED THAT THE PRIME MINISTER'S REASSURANCES ON REFORM WERE SIMILARLY LESS THAN CONVINCING. SEVERAL DEPUTIES FELT THAT CHIRAC WAS MORE CONCERNED WITH STRESSING THE MODERATE EFFECTS OF THE TWO MAJOR REFORM PROPOSALS--A CAPITAL GAINS TAX AND CORPORATE REFORM--THAN WITH ACKNOWLEDGING THE CENTRIST TENET THAT FRANCE MUST BE REFORMED IF THE COUNTRY IS TO AVOID SERIOUS SOCIAL UNREST.

3. AND FINALLY, CENTRISTS WERE DISCOURAGED WITH THE PRIME MINISTER'S UNWILLINGNESS TO CONFIRM THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD ALLOW A GENERAL POLITICAL DEBATE DURING THE OPENING WEEKS OF THE CURRENT NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SESSION. CHIRAC'S EXPLANATION--THAT THIS WAS A MATTER FOR THE ENTIRE GOVERNMENT TO DECIDE RATHER THAN FOR THE PRIME MINISTER ACTING ALONE--DID LITTLE TO ASSUAGE
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CENTRIST FEARS THAT GISCARD WOULD CHOOSE TO FINESSE FOR THE TIME BEING WHAT COULD BE AN EMBARRASSING REVIEW OF RECENT GOVERNMENT ACTIONS.

4. CENTRIST FEARS WERE JUSTIFIED ON APRIL 8 WHEN A COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEETING DECIDED AGAINST GENERAL POLITICAL DEBATE "AT THIS TIME." WHILE CLEARLY MAJOR FACTOR BEHIND THE GOVERNMENT DECISION WAS ITS UNWILLING-

NESS TO SATISFY THE SAME DEMAND BY THE LEFT FOR A POLICY
DEBATE, THE REFUSAL HAS HEIGHTENED SUSPICIONS AMONG
CENTRISTS THAT GISCARD IS NO LONGER FULLY BEHIND RE-
FORM. INITIAL REACTIONS RANGE FROM JEAN-JACQUES SERVAN-
SCHREIBER'S CALL FOR A SEVERING OF THE "CONTRACT"

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 PARIS 10502

BINDING THE CENTER TO THE PRESIDENT, TO A "NO COMMENT"
BY MINISTER OF JUSTICE LECANUET.

5. COMMENT: TAKEN TOGETHER, THE EVENTS OF THE PAST FEW
WEEKS HAVE CLEARLY SHAKEN THE FRENCH CENTER. THE WORST
HIT FORMATION IS THE RADICAL SOCIALIST (RS) PARTY, WHICH
ONCE STYLED ITSELF AS THE "LEFT WITHIN THE MAJORITY" AND
WHICH HAD HOPED TO BECOME A RALLYING POINT FOR MODERATE
SOCIALISTS ATTRACTED BY REFORM TO THE MAJORITY. THE
PREVIOUS RS POLICY OF RELYING ON GISCARD TO PRODUCE SUCH
REFORM IS NOW UNDER INTENSE FIRE FROM THE JJSS WING OF
THE PARTY, WHICH RECENTLY ENGINEERED A PETITION SIGNED
BY FIFTY OF THE PARTY'S 104-MEMBER EXECUTIVE BOARD
CALLING FOR RS INDEPENDENCE FROM CHIRAC'S COORDINATION

AUTHORITY. WHILE THE OTHER MAJOR CENTRIST PARTY, LECANUET'S CENTER DEMOCRATS, IS BEARING UP BETTER, ITS MEMBERS ALSO SEEM BADLY IN NEED OF CONVINCING EVIDENCE THAT THE MAJORITY IS NOT TURNING TO A NEO-GAULLIST PHILOSOPHY FOR SALVATION.

6. OVER THE SHORT RUN, AT LEAST, IT SEEMS DOUBTFUL THAT
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CENTER DISCONTENT WILL LEAD TO MAJOR FIREWORKS. ONE DEPUTY, ADRIEN ZELLER (BAS RHIN), HAS QUIT THE ASSEMBLY CENTER GROUP FOR NON-INSCRIBED STATUS, BUT WE DOUBT THAT SUBSTANTIAL NUMBERS OF HIS COLLEAGUES WILL FOLLOW HIM IN THE NEAR FUTURE. THE ATTITUDE FOR THE MOMENT SEEMS RATHER AN INCLINATION TO SIT TIGHT IN ANTICIPATION OF CLEARER SIGNS OF JUST WHAT GISCARD HAS IN MIND FOR THE FUTURE. A BETTER PICTURE WILL PRESUMABLY EMERGE DURING A PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCE, SCHEDULED FOR APRIL 22, WHEN GISCARD HAS PROMISED TO MAP OUT A FULL BLOWN MAJORITY PROGRAM AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE OPPOSITION'S "BUREAUCRATIC COLLECTIVISM."
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